

COMMENTARY

SEVEN NOTES ON COMMODITY FETISHISM

Stanley Moore

I have little disagreement with Professor Burke's clear and careful analysis, up to his discussion of what he calls the political significance of commodity fetishism. According to him, the section on commodity fetishism which closes the first chapter of *Capital* exposes the contrast between the superficial equality of commodity exchange and the basic inequality of capitalist production. I agree that Marx treats commodity fetishism as a mask for exploitation, but point out that these applications of his initial analysis occur later in the argument of *Capital*. In the section on commodity fetishism, I suggest, he is primarily concerned to contrast society, class or classless, with community, class or classless, and to prophesy a rebirth of community. The following notes outline my argument.

1. Although Marx presents commodity fetishism as a set of incorrect beliefs, an illusion, he explains that illusion in economic terms. It is strongest, he asserts, in cultures with economies dominated by commodity exchange. Elsewhere, where commodity exchange is marginal or absent, so is commodity fetishism. Furthermore, this illusion cannot be cured simply by replacing error with knowledge, as Feuerbach hoped to dispel the illusions of religion. The scientific discovery of the labour theory of value, according to Marx, by no means clears away the mist of commodity fetishism. The life process of society will strip off its mystic veil, he suggests, only with the disappearance of commodity exchange.

2. The significance of the contrast between appearance and substance in the chapter on commodities that opens *Capital* is revealed in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. According to Hegel, substance is distinguished from appearance as that which can exist by itself from that whose existence depends on something else. Because the existence of any man depends on the existence of some community, communities exhibit the independence of substances, individuals the

STANLEY MOORE

dependence of appearances. The family and the political state, those elements in the complex structure of Hegel's ideal state which clearly exemplify the primacy of the group, he calls substantial. Civil society, that element which seems to exemplify the primacy of the individual, he calls the external or apparent state. Marx's account of commodity fetishism parallels Hegel's account of civil society. In each case the contrast between appearance and substance is explained as originating in the historical transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. The culture of feudalism, according to Marx, was free from commodity fetishism; the culture of capitalism is dominated by it.

3. Implicit in Marx's account of commodity fetishism is a moral critique, of the type which uses a theory of man's essential nature as a criterion for evaluating existing institutions. Its counterpart is the moral critique presented more than twenty years earlier in *The Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*. The argument of the *Manuscripts* turns on the contrast between human existence and human essence in capitalist culture: the argument of *Capital* turns on the contrast between appearance and substance in that culture. The argument of the *Manuscripts* starts from Feuerbach's account of man's essential nature: the argument of *Capital* starts from the analogous, but far more complex, account of Hegel. Overcoming alienation — reuniting human existence with human essence — is presented in the *Manuscripts* as a moral imperative (Become what you are!). In *Capital* that moral imperative is disguised as an historical-philosophical dialectic of liberation. Yet the differences are less basic than the resemblance. Buried in his account of commodity fetishism is the demand for a rebirth of community that Marx first raised in 1843.

4. Capitalism, the culture in which all economic relations take the form of commodity exchange, is the middle stage in Marx's dialectic of liberation. The three stages of that dialectic are identified, in the section on commodity fetishism, as community with exploitation, society with exploitation, and community without exploitation. According to the complementary account presented in the *Grundrisse*, relations of personal dependence are the first form of social organization in which human productivity develops; personal independence, based upon dependence on things, is the second major form; and free individuality, based upon universally developed individuals controlling their social productivity as their communal wealth, is the third stage. The crucial step for clarifying this pattern is to explain why Marx considers free individuality incompatible with dependence on things.

5. There are two kinds of dependence, Rousseau writes in *Emile*. Dependence on things is the work of nature: dependence on men is the work of society. Dependence on things, being non-moral, is not a detriment to freedom or a source of vice. Dependence on men engenders every kind of vice:

SEVEN NOTES

master and slave deprave each other. The cure for this social evil is to substitute dependence on laws for dependence on individuals. If the laws of nations, like the laws of nature, could never be broken by any human power, dependence on men would become dependence on things. On what grounds does Marx reject Rousseau's ideal? His narrower argument connects the rule of laws, not men, with capitalist exploitation, which differs from previous types of exploitation in taking place through the impersonal mechanism of commodity exchange. His wider argument rejects the rule of law as such. *The Critique of the Gotha Program* attacks the system of distribution in the classless economy that Marx calls the lower stage of communism, not as a mask for exploitation, but as a system of general rules.

6. Why is free individuality incompatible with a social order structured by general rules? Marx's answer can be derived from the statements of his dialectic of liberation presented in the first chapter of *The German Ideology* and *On the Jewish Question*. The culture of feudalism, like Plato's ideal state, is a structure of complementary roles — a cosmos of callings. In such a community public and private are not divided: the sole expression of individuality is the personal style with which each member plays his role. The culture of capitalism, like Hobbes's ideal state, is a structure of general rules — a system of abstract equality. In such a society public and private are sharply divided: the sole expression of individuality is personal competition within a framework of impersonal coercion. Under capitalism, Marx writes, individuals imagine themselves freer than under feudalism, because their conditions of life are accidental: in reality they are less free, because they are more dependent on the power of things. His ideal of free individuality can be realised only in a new community. Like precapitalist communities, it will not separate the public from the private life of any individual, through general rules. Unlike them, however, it will not limit any individual to a specific role, through division of labour. The prototype of this community with neither rules or roles is not any historical community based upon slavery or serfdom: it is the millenarian vision of a community of saints.

7. To what extent is Marx's dialectic of liberation, culminating in this vision of a new community, compatible with the principles of historical materialism? To explore this question is to find a key to forty years of Marx's intellectual development and to one hundred years of conflict among his followers — a conflict that has reached its crisis in our time.

Philosophy
University of California, San Diego